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Montaigne's Essays

In Three Books. With Notes and Quotations. And an Account of The Author's Life ; With a short Character of the Author and Translator, by the late Marquis of Halifax; With the Addition of A Complete Table to each Volume

Montaigne, Michel Eyquem de

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Chap. IV. Of Diversion.

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C H A P. IV.

Of Diversion.

*What Womens
Mournings
commonly are.*

I Was formerly employ'd to comfort a Lady under a real Affliction; for most of their Mournings are but mere Artifice and Ceremony.

*Uberibus semper Lacrymis, semperque paratis,
In statione sua, atque expectantibus illam
Quo jubeat manare modo. †*

They always have a dam for present use,
Ready, and waiting when they draw the Sluice,
On least pretences of Joys, Grievs, or Fears,
To fall out in false dissembling Tears.

A Man goes the wrong way to work when he opposes this Passion; for Opposition does but irritate and make them more obstinate in Sorrow, and the Evil is exasperated by being contended with. We see in common Discourse, that what I have negligently let fall from me, if a Man takes hold of it, so as to controvert what I have said, I justify it with the best Arguments I can find; and much more a thing wherein I have a real Interest. And besides, in so doing, you enter rudely upon your Operation; whereas the first Addresses of a *Physician* to his Patient should be gracious, gay and pleasing. Never did any ill-look'd, morose *Physician* do any thing to the purpose. On the contrary then, a Man should at the first approaches favour their Grief, and express some Approbation of their Sorrow: By this Intelligence you obtain Credit to proceed farther, and after an easy and insen-

*How Consolation
ought to be
practised.*

† *Juven. Sat. 6.*

fible

fible manner fall into Discourses more solid and proper for their Cure. I, whose aim it was principally to gull the Assistants, who had their Eyes fix'd upon me, design'd only to palliate the Disease. And indeed I have found by Experience, that I have an unlucky hand at persuading. My Arguments are either too sharp, or too flat, and either press too roughly, or not home enough. After I had some time apply'd my self to her Grief, I did not attempt to cure her by strong and lively Reasons, either because I wanted them, or because I thought to do my Business better another way; neither did I insist upon a choice of any of those methods of Consolation which *Philosophy* prescribes; *That what we complain of is no Evil*, according to *Cleanthes*; *that it is a light Evil*, according to the *Peripateticks*; *That to bemoan one's self is an Action neither commendable nor just*, according to *Chrysippus*; nor this of *Epicurus*, more suitable to my way, *of shifting the Thoughts from afflicting Things to those that are pleasing*; nor making a Bundle of all these together, to make use of upon Occasion according to *Cicero*; but gently bending my Discourse, and by little and little digressing, sometimes to Subjects nearer, and sometimes more remote from the purpose; she was more intent to what I said. I insensibly depriv'd her of her Sorrow, and kept her calm and in good Humour whilst I continued there. I herein made use of *Diversion*. They who succeeded me in the same Service, did not for all that find any Amendment in her, for I had not applied the Ax to the Root. Perhaps I touched elsewhere upon some sort of publick Diversions. And the Practice of military ones, which *Pericles* made use of in the *Peloponnesian* War, with a Thousand others in different Places to withdraw the adverse Forces from their own Countries, is too frequent in *History*. It was an ingenious Evasion by which the *Sieur d' Humbercourt* sav'd both himself and others in the City of *Liege*, into which the Duke of *Burgundy*, who kept it besieg'd, had made him enter, to execute the Articles granted them for their promis'd Surrender. The People being assembled by Night to consider the Matter, begun to mutiny against the past Agreement, and to that degree, that several of them resolv'd to fall upon the Commis-

fioners who had labour'd in it, and whom they had in their Power. He feeling the first Blasts of this first Storm of the People, who were coming to rush into his Lodgings, suddenly sent out to them two of the Inhabitants of the City (of whom he had some with him) with new and milder Terms, to be propos'd in their Council, which he had forged on the Spot. These two diverted the first Tempest, carrying back the inrag'd Rabble to the *Town-Hall*, to hear and consider of what they had to say. The Deliberation was short: A second Storm arose as impetuous as the other; whereupon he dispatch'd four new Mediators of the same Quality to meet them, protesting that they had now better Conditions to present them with, and such as would give them absolute Satisfaction; by which means the Tumult was once more appeas'd, and the People again turn'd back to the Conclave. In fine, by thus ordering these Amusements one after another, diverting their Fury, and dissipating it in frivolous Consultations, he laid it at last asleep till the Day appear'd, which was his principal End. This other Story that follows is also of the same Predicament. *Atalanta*, a Virgin of excelling Beauty, and of wonderful disposition of Body, to disengage herself from the crowd of a thousand Suitors, who sought her in Marriage, made this Proposition, that she would accept of him for a Husband who should equal her in Running, upon Condition that they who fail'd should lose their Lives; there were enough who thought the Prize very well worth the Hazard, and who suffered the Penalty of the bloody Contract. *Hippomenes*, being to try his Fortune after the rest, makes his Address to the *Goddess of Love*, imploring her Assistance, who granting his Request, gave him three golden Apples, and instructed him how to use them. The Ground they ran upon being an even Plain, as *Hippomenes* perceiv'd his Mistress to press hard up to him, he, as it were by chance, let fall one of these Apples; the Maid, taken with the Beauty of it, fail'd not to step out of her Way to take it up:

Obstupuit

*Obstupuit virgo, nitidique cupidine pomi
Declinat cursus, aurumque volubile tollit: **

The nimble Virgin, dazzled to behold
The glittering Apple tumbling o'er the Mold,
Stop'd her Career to seize the rolling Gold.

He did the same, when he saw his time, by the second and third, till by so diverting her, and making her lose so much Ground, he won the Course. When *Physicians* cannot stop a *Catarrh*, they divert, and turn it into some other less dangerous part. And I find also that it is the most ordinary practice for the Diseases of the Mind. *Abducendus etiam nonnunquam animus est ad alia studia, sollicitudines, curas, negotia: Loci denique mutatione, tanquam ægroti non convalescentes, sæpe curandus est* †. The Mind is sometimes to be diverted to other Studies, Thoughts, Cares, and Business: and lastly, by change of Place, as sick Persons that do not recover are order'd change of Air. 'Tis to little effect directly to juggle a Man's Infirmities, we neither make him sustain, nor repel the Attack; we only make him decline and evade it. This other Lesson is too high and too difficult. 'Tis for Men of the first Class of Knowledge purely to insilt upon the thing, to consider and judge of it. It belongs to a *Socrates* only, to entertain Death with an indifferent Countenance, to grow acquainted with it, and to sport with it; he seeks no Consolation out of the thing itself; dying appears to him a natural and indifferent Accident, 'tis there that he fixes his Sight and Resolution, without looking elsewhere. The Disciples of *Hegesias*, that starve themselves to death, inflamed with a Desire of Dying, by his fine Lectures, which were so frequent, that King *Ptolemy* order'd he should be forbidden to entertain his Followers with such Homicide-doctrines: those People do not consider Death itself, neither do they judge of it; it is not there that they fix their Thoughts, they run forwards, and aim at a new Being. The poor Wretches that we see brought to the Place of Execution, full of ardent Devotion, and therein,

* *Ovid. Metam. l. 10.* † *Cicero Tusc. l. 5.*

as much as in them lies, employing all their Senses, their Ears in hearing the Instructions that are given them, their Eyes and Hands lifted up towards Heaven, their Voices in loud Prayers, with a vehement and continual Emotion, are doubtless things very commendable and proper for such a necessity. We ought to commend them for their Devotion, but not properly for their Constancy. They shun the encounter, they divert their Thoughts from the Consideration of Death, as Children are amus'd with some Toy or other, when the Chirurgeon is going to give them a prick with his Lancet. I have seen some, who casting sometimes their Eyes upon the dreadful Instruments of Death round about, have fainted, and furiously turn'd their Thoughts another way. Such as are to pass a formidable Precipice, are advis'd either to shut their Eyes, or look another way. *Subrius Flavius*, being by *Nero's* Command to be put to death, and by the hand of *Niger*, both of them great Captains; when they led him to the Place appointed for his Execution, seeing the Hole, that *Niger* had caus'd to be hollow'd to put him into, ill-favour'dly contrived: *Neither is this*, said he, turning to the Soldiers who guarded him, *according to Military Discipline*. And to *Niger*, who exhorted him to keep his Head firm, *do but thou strike as firmly*, said he. And he very well foresaw what wou'd follow, when he said so; for *Niger's* Arm so trembled, that he had several Blows at his Head before he could cut it off. This Man seems to have had his Thoughts rightly fix'd upon the Subject: he that dies in a Battle, with his Sword in his hand, does not then think of Death, he feels, nor considers it not; the Ardour of the Fight diverts his Thoughts another way. A Gentleman of my Acquaintance, falling as he was fighting a Duel at single Rapier, and feeling himself nail'd to the Earth by nine or ten Thrusts of his Enemy after he was on the Ground, the Seconds call'd to him to think of his Conscience; but he has since told me, that though he very well heard what they said, it nothing mov'd him, and that he never thought of any thing but how to disengage and revenge himself: he afterwards kill'd his Man in that very Duel. He who brought *L. Syllanus* the Sentence of Death, did him a very great Kindness, in that having received his

Answer,

Answer, that he was well prepared to die, but not by base Hands, he ran upon him with his Soldiers to force him; and naked as he was, obstinately defended himself with his Fists and Feet, he made him lose his Life in the Dispute; by that means dissipating and diverting in a sudden and furious Rage the painful Apprehension of a lingering Death to which he was design'd. We always think of something else; either the Hope of a better Life comforts and supports us, or the Hope of our Childrens Valour, or the future Glory of our Name, or the leaving behind the Evils of this Life, or the Vengeance that threatens those who are the Causes of our Death, administers Consolation to us.

*Spero equidem mediis, si quid pia numina possunt,
Supplicia hausurum scopulis & nomine Dido
Sæpe vocaturum.
Audiam, & hæc manes veniet mihi fama sub imos*.*

Sure if the Gods have any Power at all,
Split on a Rock, thou shalt on *Dido* call.
——thy Fortunes I shall know
By Fame convey'd me to the Shades below.†

Xenophon was sacrificing with a Crown upon his Head, when one came to bring him News of the Death of his Son *Gryllus*, slain in the Battle of *Mantineæ*. At the first Surprize of the News he threw his Crown to the Ground; but understanding by the Sequel of the Narrative, that his Son died in a most brave and valiant manner, he took it up, and replac'd it upon his Head. Even *Epicurus* at his Death comforts himself with Reflections of the Usefulness and Eternity of his Writings. *Omnes clari, & nobilitati Labores, sunt tolerabiles* ||. All Labours that are illustrious and renown'd, are supportable. And the same Wound, the same Fatigue, is not, says *Xenophon*, so intolerable

* *Æneid*. l. 4. † *Mr. Ogilby*.
|| *Cicero Tusc.* l. 2.

The cheerful
Death of Epa-
minondas,

to a General of an Army, as to a com-
mon Soldier. *Epaminondas* died much
more cheerful, having been inform'd
that the Victory remain'd to him. *Hæc
sunt solatia, hæc fomenta summorum do-
lorum*†. These are Lenitives, and Fomentations to the
greatest Pains. And such other Circumstances amuse,
divert, and turn our Thoughts from the Consideration
of the thing in itself. Even the Arguments of *Philosophy*
are always diverting, and putting by the Matter, so as
scarce to rub upon the Sore. The greatest Man of the
first *Philosophical* School, and Superintendant over all the
rest, the great *Zeno*, against Death forms this *Syllogism*:
*No Evil is honourable; but Death is honourable: There-
fore Death is not Evil.* Against Drunkenness this: *No
one commits his Secrets to a Drunkard, but every one com-
mits his Secrets to a wise Man: therefore a wise Man is
no Drunkard.* Is this to hit the Mark? I love to see,
that these great and leading Souls cannot rid themselves
of our Company. As perfect Men as they would be,
they are yet but simple Men. Revenge is a sweet Pas-
sion, of great and natural Impression; I discern it well
enough, though I have no manner of Experience of it.
From which, not long ago, to divert a young Prince, I
did not tell him, that if a Man struck him on one Cheek,
he must turn the other to him, to fulfil the Duties of
Charity; nor did I go about to represent the Tragical
Events which Poetry attributes to that Passion: I left
those Strings untouched, and amused my self with making
him relish the Beauty of a contrary Image; by repre-
senting to him what Honour, Esteem, and Good-will he
would acquire by Clemency and Good-nature, I diverted
him to Ambition. Thus a Man is to deal in such Cases.
If your Passion of Love be too violent, disperse it, say
they, and they say true; for I have oft try'd it with Ad-
vantage; break it into several Desires, of which let one
be Regent, if you will, over the rest; but, lest it should
tyrannize and domineer over you, weaken and protract,
in dividing and diverting it;

† *Cicero. Tusc. l. 2.*

Cum morosa vago singultiet inguine venæ.*

Conjicito humorem collectum in Corpora quæque †.

and look to't in time, lest it proves too troublesome to deal with, when it has once seiz'd you.

*Si non prima novis conturbes vulnera plagis,
Volgivaque vagus venere ante recentia cures ‡.*

Unless you fancy every one you view,
Revel in Love, and cure old Wounds by new ||.

I once was wounded with a vehement Displeasure, and withal, more just than vehement; I might perhaps have lost my self in it, if I had meerly trusted to my own Strength. Having need of a powerful Diversion to disengage me, I found out one, by amorous Arts and Study, in which I was assisted by my Youth: Love reliev'd and rescu'd me from the Evil wherein Friendship had engaged me. 'Tis in every thing else the same, a violent Imagination hath seiz'd me, I find it a nearer way to change, than to subdue it: I depute, if not one contrary, yet another at least in it's place: Variation always relieves, dissolves, and dissipates; if I am not able to contend with it, I escape from it; and in avoiding it, slip out of the way, and make my doubles: Shifting of Places, Business, and Company, I secure my self in the crowd of other Thoughts and Fancies, where it loses my trace, and I escape. After the same manner does *Nature* proceed, by the Benefit of Inconstancy; for the time she has given us as the Sovereign Physician of our Passions, principally gains it's effect by that means; by supplying our Imaginations with other, and new Affairs, it unnerves, and dissolves the first Apprehension, how strong soever. A wise Man sees his Friend little less dying at the end of five and twenty

Time the Physician of our Passions.

* *Persius Sat. 6.* † *Lucret. l. 4.* ‡ *Ibid.*
|| *Mr. Creech.*

Years,

Years, than the first Year, and according to *Epicurus*, no less at all; for he did not attribute any Alleviation of Afflictions, neither to the foresight of the Man, or the Antiquity of the Evils themselves. But so many other Thoughts traverse the first, that it languishes and tires at last. *Alcibiades*, to divert the Inclination of common Rumours, cut off the Ears and Tail of his beautiful Dog, and turn'd him out into the publick Place, to the end, that giving the People this occasion to prate, they might let his other Actions alone. I have also seen, for this same end of diverting the Opinions and Conjectures of the People, and to stop their Mouths, some Women conceal their real Affections by those that were only counterfeit, and put on to blind Men's Eyes; but I have likewise seen some of them, who in counterfeiting, have suffer'd themselves to be caught indeed, and have quitted the true and original Affection, for the feign'd. By which I have learned, that they who find their Affections well-plac'd, are Fools to consent to this Disguise. The favourable and publick Reception being only reserv'd for this pretended Servant, a Man may conclude him a Fellow of very little Address, and less Wit, if he does not in the end put himself into your place, and you into his; this is properly to cut out, and make up a Shoe for another to draw on. A little thing will turn and divert us; because a little thing holds us. We do not much consider Subjects in gross, and in themselves; but there are little and superficial Circumstances that strike us; the vain useles Husks that fall off from those Subjects.

*Folliculos ut nunc teretes æstate cicadæ
Linquunt——**

Such as the hollow Husks, or Shells we find
In Summer, Grasshoppers do leave behind.

Even *Plutarch* himself laments his Daughter for the little apish Tricks of her Infancy. The Remembrance of a Farewel, of an Action, of a particular Favour, of a last Recommendation, afflicts us. The Sight of *Cæsar's*

* *Lucret. l. 5.*

Robe troubled all *Rome*, which was more than his Death had done. Even the sound of Names ringing in our Ears, as *My poor Master*, or, *my great Friend*; *Alas, my dear Father*, or *my sweet Daughter*, make us melancholy and sad. When these Repetitions torment me, and that I examine them a little nearer, I find them but a *Grammatical Complaint*; I am only wounded with the Word and Tone, as the Exclamations of Preachers very oft work more upon their Auditory than their Reasons; and as the mournful Eyes and Voice of a Beast kill'd for Service, without my weighing, or penetrating at the same time into the true and real essence of my Subject.

His se stimulis dolor ipse laceffit. †

With these Incitements Grief it self provokes.

These are the Foundations of our Mourning. The Obstinacy of the Stone against all Remedies administred to me, has sometimes thrown me into so long Suppressions of Urine for three or four Days together, and so near Death, that it had been Folly to have hop'd to evade it; and it was much rather to have been desir'd, considering the Miseries I endure in those cruel Fits. Oh, how great a Master in the Art of *Hangmanship*, was that honest Emperor, who *Criminals Yard* caused Criminals to be tied in such a *ty'd up to stop* Manner that they might die for want of *their Urine*. making Water! Finding my self in this Condition, I consider'd by how many light Causes and Objects Imagination nourish'd in me the regret of Life; and of what Atoms the Weight and Difficulty of this dislodging was compos'd in my Soul, and to how many idle and frivolous Thoughts we give way in so great an Affair. A Dog, a Horse, a Book, a Glass, and what not? were consider'd in my Loss. To others, their ambitious Hopes, their Money, their Knowledge, not less foolish Considerations in my Opinion than mine. I look upon Death carlesly, when I look upon it universally as the end of Life. I insult over it in gross; but

† *Lucan. l. 2.*

in

in Retail it domineers over me. The Tears of a Footman, the disposing of my Clothes, the touch of a Friendly Hand, which is a common Consolation, discourages and melts me. So do the Complaints in *Tragedies* infect our Souls with Grief, and the Grievs of *Dido* and *Ariadne*, touch with Compassion, even those that don't believe them in *Virgil* and *Catullus*. It is an Example of an obstinate and obdurate Nature, to be sensible of no Emotion; as 'tis reported for a Miracle of *Polemon*; who not so much as alter'd his Countenance at the biting of a mad Dog, that tore away the Calf of his Leg. And no Wisdom proceeds so far, as to conceive so lively and entire a cause of Sorrow by Judgment, that it suffers no encrease by Prefence, where the Eyes and Ears have their Share; Parts that are not to be moved but by vain Accidents. Is it Reason, that even the *Arts* themselves should make an Advantage of our natural Brutality and Weakness? The *Orator*, says Rhetorick, in the farce of his Pleading, shall be mov'd with the sound of his own Voice, and feigned Emotions, and suffer it self to be impos'd upon by the Passion he represents; he will imprint in himself a true and real Grief, by means of the Part he plays, to transmit it to the Audience, who are yet less concern'd than he: As they do, who are hired at Funerals to assist in the Ceremony of Sorrow, who sell their Tears and Mourning by Weight and Measure. For altho' they act in a borrow'd Form, nevertheless by habituating themselves, and settling their Countenances to the Occasion, 'tis most certain, they oft are really affected with a true and real Sorrow. I was one, among several other of his Friends, who convey'd the Body of Monsieur de Grammont to *Soissons*, from the Siege of *la Fere*, where he was slain; I observ'd that in all Places we pass'd through, we filled the People with Tears and Lamentations by the mere solemn Pomp of our Convoy, for the Name of the Deceased was not there so much as known. *Quintilian* reports to have seen *Players* so deeply engag'd in a Mourning Part, that they could not give over weeping when they came Home, and who, having taken upon them to stir up that Passion in another, have themselves foster'd it to that degree, as to find themselves surprized not only
into

into Tears, but even with Paleness, and the Behaviour of Men really overwhelmed with Grief. In a Country near our Mountains, the Women play Priest *Martin*, that is to say, both the Priest and the Clerk; for as they augment the Regret of the deceased Husband, by the remembrance of the good and agreeable Qualities he was Master of; they also at the same time make a Register of, and publish his Imperfections; as if, of themselves to enter into some Compensation, and so divert themselves from Compassion to Disdain; and yet with much better Grace than we do, who when we lose an old Acquaintance, strive to give him new and false Praises, and to make him quite another thing when we have lost sight of him, than he seem'd to be when we saw him: as if Regret was an instructive thing, or that Tears enlighten'd our Understandings by washing them. For my part, I henceforth renounce all favourable Testimonies Men would give of me, not because I shall be worthy of them, but because I shall be dead. Whoever shall ask a Man, What Interest have you in this Siege? The Interest of Example, he will say, and of common Obedience to my Prince: I pretend to no Profit by it; and for Glory, I know how small a part can reflect upon such a private Man as I am: I have here neither Passion nor Quarrel in it. And yet you shall see him the next day quite another Man, chafing, and red with Fury, rang'd in Battle for the Assault: 'Tis the glittering of so much Steel, the Fire and Noise of our Cannon and Drums, that have infus'd this new Rancour and Fury into his Veins. A frivolous Cause you will say: How a Cause? There needs none to agitate the Mind; a meer whimsey without Body, and without Subject will rule and sway it. Let me think of building Castles in the Air, my Imagination suggests to me Conveniences and Pleasures, with which my Soul is really tickled and pleas'd. How often do we torment our Mind with Anger or Sorrow by such Shadows, and engage ourselves in fantastick Passions, that alter both the Soul and Body? What astonish'd, fleeing, and confus'd Grimaces does this raving put our Faces into! What Sallies and Agitation both of Members and Voices does it occasion? Does it not seem that this individual Man has false

Visions from the Crowds of others, with whom he has to do, or, that he is possess'd with some internal *Dæmon* that persecutes him? Enquire of yourself, where is the Object of this Mutation? Is there any thing but us in Nature, but subsisting Nullity, over which it has Power? *Cambyfes*, for having dreamt that his Brother should be one Day King of *Persia*, put him to death; a beloved Brother, and a Brother whom he tenderly loved, in whom he had always confided. *Aristedemus*, King of the *Messenians*, killed himself out of a fancy of ill Omen, from I know not what Howling of his Dogs; and King *Midas* did as much upon account of some foolish Dream he had. 'Tis to prize Life at it's just Value, to abandon it for a Dream. Hear our Soul speak, she triumphs over the Body, and the Weakness that exposes it to every Injury and Alteration; she has just Reason to say of it:

O prima infelix fingenti Terra Prometheo!
Ille parum cauti pectoris egit opus,
Corpora disponens, mentem non vidit in arte,
Recta Animi primum debuit esse via.*

O, 'twas for a most unhappy Day,
 When rash *Prometheus* form'd him out of Clay!
 In his Attempt th' ambitious Architect
 Did indiscreetly the main thing neglect.
 In framing Bodies, he had not the Art
 To form the Mind, which is the chiefest part.

* *Prop. l. 3. El. 3.*



CHAP. V.

Upon some Verses of Virgil.

IN Proportion as useful Thoughts are full and solid, so are they also more cumberfom and heavy. Vice, Death, Poverty, Diseases, are grave and grievous Subjects. A Man must have his Soul instructed in the means
 to